

Threshing machine was key to grain harvest

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The threshing machine was on its way to our farm. Leading the road procession was a huge steel-mounted engine.

Moving at a snail's pace, this smoke-belching behemoth was essential to the farm scene in the latter part of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th.

At one end of the threshing machine was an apron that conveyed grain. At the other was an adjustable blower that discharged the straw. On one side was a bagger that discharged the grain into bags for transport to a granary.

Bringing up the rear of the procession were those farmers and their wagons who were going to help with the threshing at our farm. This usually included the nearest neighbors.

For a 10-year-old, threshing time ranked right up there with Christmas and the Fourth of July. After all, who could ever forget those huge meals topped off with several deserts with unlimited seconds?

Then, too, it was an initiation into manhood for a young boy. If Dad deemed one old enough and responsible enough, you became part of the threshing crew. This meant you could eat with the men on the first sitting instead of waiting for the second sitting with the women and children.

The placement of the machine was of paramount importance. The front end had to be accessible to the loads of grain bundles brought to the fields. The back end had to be placed so the straw went where the owner wanted it. This usually meant into a mow in the barn reserved for it. If no room was available, it had to be stacked where it was



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convenient.

Even more important, the machine had to be leveled to operate efficiently. Even the distance from the granary was important because the bags usually were carried individually to be emptied into the grain bins.

While all this was being considered, the neighbors already were out in the fields loading the drying grain bundles. One or two farmers were on top of the wagon, stacking bundles to establish the load. Several more were throwing bundles up onto the wagon.

When the wagon would hold no



Photo courtesy Kewaunee County Historical Society

Bringing in the grain: This threshing crew took time to pose for a picture in west Kewaunee County in the early 1900s.

more, the farmer would drive the horse-drawn wagon to the threshing machine. The bundles were thrown into the conveyor, drawing them inside. Beaters cut the twine holding them together and knocked the kernels from the straw.

The grain was fed through a series of sieves while fans blew the chaff and straw away. The grain was augured to the top, and gravity allowed the grain to flow into the bagger. Straw was discharged through a blower on the back.

Meanwhile, neighbor women were working in the kitchen with Mom to get the meals ready. The desserts had been made the night before, but the workers had voracious appetites and

each household had a reputation to protect. One couldn't be stingy on the servings and one couldn't stress cleanliness enough. Certain neighbors were rumored to be short on second helpings, the food questionable, or the flies in the dining room too numerous.

At the end of the work day, a keg or two of beer was set up and sandwiches were served. The men enjoyed each others' camaraderie and the off-colored jokes began to fill the air. It was a time to let down one's hair after a very hard day of work. As children, we were allowed on the periphery and sometimes even got a glass of beer. It was the best of times for a 10-year-old.